

The Tightrope

In America today, there are many towns adjacent to each other with extreme differences in culture, wealth and education. There is a specific dividing line between these towns, but you don't need any signs to tell when you have crossed over. It makes you wonder if one town is blessed and the other one is cursed. Or maybe both towns are cursed.

Some people, like Juan, lived in both worlds. Each morning, he drives his pick up truck into town, past manicured lawns and fruit trees, to a construction site downtown. Oak Park's town council decided to makeover Main Street with gas lamps, cobblestones, benches and topiary, resembling something out of 19th century England. While he was working, Juan was accepted here, although not seen. Once the Sun went down, when those fortunate few were assembling for dinner, he lit up like one of those new gas lamps.

Justin, one of the fortunate few, walked into the French restaurant with his girlfriend, Karen, the kind of girl you want to be seen with. Karen had the right looks, the right education and the right family. She dressed classically, sporting a blue skirt, white ruffled top and camel hair blazer. Her hair was straight, shoulder length and blonde, which only brought attention to her blue eyes and perfect skin. She worked as a junior associate in a local law firm, the same one where Justin was applying. Justin wasn't dating Karen to help get the job, but it wouldn't hurt, so long as he was discreet about it. Justin and Karen had one thing in common, a comfortable life, neither having had experienced the struggles that people like Juan had overcome.

Juan put his tools into the lock box of his truck and headed home. It was only three miles away but East Oak Park seemed more like one of those cities you see on the news, where some gang banger killed an innocent child. Driving past graffiti-filled walls, a 24-hour convenience store and a run down elementary school, Juan was quickly reminded of his world, one where the night brought out drug dealers, prostitutes and the people addicted to them. In Oak Park, strollers would be listening to the chamber music softly playing from the rock gardens he had helped create; here, anyone walking would hear the loud and vulgar sounds of boom boxes and cars with heavy bass accents, cruising slowly while their passengers watched for prey. Turning the corner, he saw his church. "Maybe I should stop in and say a prayer," he thought. But he was hungry and decided to go home.

Justin examined Karen while she read the menu. What did she see in him? Karen could have anyone she wanted. It wouldn't surprise him if someone at the firm were propositioning her. Maybe one of the senior partners, ready to exchange their first wife for a trophy or one of the rich clients she saw daily.

"I'll have the Waldorf salad, Salmon with truffles and Pommes de Terre au gratin" she said in fluent French.

"Shrimp salad and the steak Bordelaise, medium" said Justin, trying to keep up.

Juan's wife Ines was putting dinner on the table; rice, beans, cheese and vegetables melted in a casserole dish. He could hear his seven-year old son Manny and ten-year old daughter Dania playing in the other room.

"Dania, take Manny to wash hands and come to dinner...Daddy's home." Juan hung up his jacket and kissed Ines on the cheek. "How was your day?" he said. Ines worked part-time in the school cafeteria, serving free breakfasts to kids who wouldn't get anything at home.

“That school,” she sighed. “Even the young ones are acting like punks now, flashing gang signs and wearing their pants down to here” as she gestured to her upper thigh. “At lunch, some fifth grader made a gun sign with his hand when I told him he couldn’t have seconds.”

Juan shook his head and thought about the kids in Oak Park, dropped off from their parent’s BMW’s, Mercedes’ and SUV’s. “Two public schools but you would never know it,” he thought. “But no trouble for Manny and Dania?”

“No, they’re fine, I keep an eye out for them.”

The waiter brought a shrimp salad to Justin and the Waldorf to Karen. They sipped their wine, ignoring the waiter. “So, how’s the real world of law?” Justin asked.

Karen responded without looking up from her salad. “We had a deposition today for a man accused of embezzling from his family business. It’s pretty clear that he did it.”

Justin indicated that he was listening. “Oh, so what’s your strategy?”

Karen smiled. “We’ll get him off. His father was sleeping with the secretary and will settle once we show him the pictures.” Karen looked up and touched Justin’s hand. “Did you hear from the bar yet?” Justin had failed the bar exam the first time he took it.

Dating him was Karen’s way of slumming it. “Should be online any day now; I’m pretty sure I nailed it this time.”

Karen winked. “Did you check it today?” knowing that the results had been posted. “Go ahead, check.”

Justin pulled out his phone, entered the web address and signed in. “Hey! I passed,” showing the screen to Karen. He leaned over and kissed her.

Karen replied, “Good, I had planned a little celebration for tonight.”

Ines, Dania and Manny bowed their heads while Juan said grace. “Lord, thank you for this meal and for our children. Please care for us and for those less fortunate that do not have food tonight. We pray this in your name. Amen.”

Ines filled the children’s plates first. “Is there another job after you finish this one?” she asked.

Juan nodded his head as he ate some vegetables. “I think so. My boss said Oak Park wants to extend the project to the town hall and courthouse. That should take another six months at least.” This news came as a relief to Ines who was worried about Christmas presents and utility bills. Ines paid the bills each month, taking some stress off of Juan. He didn’t realize how some past due notices had come because Ines was very good at juggling their paychecks and credit.

“God bless those poor people! What would they do without cobblestone streets and gas lamps?” said Ines.

“Don’t forget the benches and Japanese gardens with the music playing” said Juan.

“Well, their good fortune means work for you Juan, don’t forget that.”

Juan smiled and agreed. “Yes, where would I be without the fortunate few?”

Justin was looking down at his steak. “Look at this. I said medium and this is medium well.”

Karen looked up from her salmon and examined his steak. “Yes, you’re right. You should send it back.” She gestured to the waiter and gave him instructions. “I want tonight to be special for you!”

Justin wondered what other surprises Karen had for him. “Won’t we be late for....” when Karen interrupted.

“For what? You don’t know what I have planned?” Justin rolled his wine around the glass and caught Karen’s expression. “You’ll see,” and this time her expression confirmed the fantasy he had already started. Justin tried to contain his enthusiasm, tried to play it cool. He was dating up here and both of them knew it.

The children were watching some game show on television while Juan helped Ines clean up. He pulled a small box from his pocket. “I bought you this,” and handed it to her. Her first thought was the money. His first thought was making her happy.

“Juan, I’ve told you not to buy me things. Save money for the children.” Juan watched Ines’ expression as she opened the box and saw the charm bracelet. Ines drew her breath in and hugged Juan. “Thank you dear, it’s so beautiful.” Two of the charms had the names of their children and one the name of Ines’ mom who had passed away in the summer. When she saw that, Ines started to cry.

“Now, now, no crying” as he took out his handkerchief and wiped off the tears. “This should be a celebration!”

This time Justin’s steak was cooked perfectly. He ate quickly enough to finish without Karen noticing. “So, can you give me a hint?” hoping to encourage her to end the suspense.

“OK, but it’s not here” her voice and head gesturing that it was close.

“So it’s in town?” he said as he took the last sip from his wine glass.

Karen was enjoying the torture now. “Finish your steak dear” while she patted her mouth with her napkin. “We have a few more minutes before it will be ready.”

Juan put the leftovers in the refrigerator and thought about lunch tomorrow. There was cold chicken he could slice up for a sandwich, some cheese, an apple and some cereal. Juan liked to snack on cereal on his breaks. It was better than junk food.

“I’ll drive” said Karen and motioned Justin to the passenger side of her BMW. Justin’s imagination was flickering like one of those jump cut commercials that only show you a split second of a hundred scenes. When Karen said, “close your eyes and lean toward me,” he expected a tender kiss. But Karen put one of those dark sleeping masks on him; the kind people wear to keep out the light. “OK, sit back, we’ll be there soon,” and she laughed a little.

At this point, the scenes in Justin’s commercial had taken another turn and he could feel his pulse quicken. It might be the adrenalin flowing when he said, “should I be scared?” still trying to play it cool.

“You should be if you take off that mask, mister.” But taking off the mask was the last thing Justin was going to do. He was enjoying this too much and wasn’t going to blow his surprise.

“Bedtime Manny, bedtime Dania. Go brush your teeth now” Ines said in her firm but loving mom voice. The kids scurried obediently. After they finished the dishes, they could hear mumbling from the bedroom.

“I’ll tuck them in, you sit and relax” said Juan. Manny and Dania were under the covers in the small room they shared, just big enough for a bunk bed, toys and stuffed animals. “Did you say your prayers?”

“Yes Daddy” they said, almost in unison. “We prayed for you and mommy too.”

Juan realized what a blessing his children were, not like those punks at their school. “I love you” as he kissed each of them. “Have a good dream.”

Oak Park was one of those upper class towns that drew money and attention far exceeding the population size. There were investment firms, law and professional offices everywhere. They were only a mile from a world-class university, hospital and venture capital buildings. They even had their own hotel, reserved for business meetings and people accustomed to paying \$300/night. Karen parked, surprised Justin with a kiss and said, “We’re here, but leave that mask on.”

Justin obeyed this gentle command hoping that wasn’t the last order she gave him. She took his hand, walked into the lobby and stopped. Justin could feel a thick rug under his feet and the sound of people snickering at him. “Could this be someone’s house? Is it a surprise party of some kind? Maybe something kinkier?” Or at least his mind went there.

“Thank you” said Karen and she walked him into an elevator.

Justin tried to count the floors, 1, 2, 3 and 4. “We must be in a hotel. She’s planned something really hot and wants it to be a surprise.”

Ines was visibly relaxed, grateful to have such a good man by her side. Juan never strayed and he always put her and the children before his own needs. They sat on the couch watching television. Ines would put her legs on top of Juan’s lap and he would massage them. After a long day on her feet at school, she looked forward to this mini-spa from her husband. It wasn’t long before her eyes started to close and Juan found himself watching the show alone.

Karen quietly opened the door, led him over to a bed and sat him down.

Justin thought about taking off his jacket and tie, but resisted. “Maybe she wants me blindfolded the whole time? That would be intense.”

Karen put her hands gently on his lapels and said, “Just give me five minutes, ok?” Then touched his cheek.

“It’s been five minutes Karen,” Justin called out, thinking she was in the bathroom changing. He heard her walking back toward him.

“OK, take off the mask!” Justin heart was pounding a mile a minute now. This was the sexiest rendezvous he had ever had. Now he had to perform up to her expectations. The lights came on and he heard several voices.

“Surprise!” and Justin saw the partners from Karen’s firm there, holding champagne glasses and smiling broadly.

“Welcome to the firm Justin” said the senior partner. “We’ve been holding this room waiting for you to pass the bar. It was starting to get expensive.”

Even though Justin knew he was kidding, he was more than a little disappointed in what had happened. A job with the firm was what he wanted, but not what he had been thinking about. He put on his most sincere face and thanked his new boss. “An honor to work for you sir. I won’t let you down.” He would be working with Karen. He wanted to keep seeing her. “Would that be appropriate now that they worked together?”

A table with fancy desserts, coffee, tea and more champagne beckoned them. Karen, now less personal with Justin, suggested they have dessert and make small talk. “Never too soon to make points at work” she said.

Her change of demeanor hit Justin. “Would this good fortune mean the end of him and Karen?”

Juan and Ines had a great night, as much out of deep love and commitment as passion. It was due in part to the sense of security Juan had, knowing that he had another solid work project to get them through until summer when he had other work he could do. He decided to leave home early tomorrow, stop at church and offer a prayer of thanks for this blessing.

An hour later, the partners pulled out cigars and hard liquor and sat down to play some cards. Karen whispered something to one of them and he acknowledged. He came up to Justin and shook his hand. “See you tomorrow, son. 8:00am sharp you know.”

Justin smiled “I’ll be there. Thanks again.” He and Karen left the room, more like business colleagues than lovers. “Now I understand,” said Justin forcing a smile. “You certainly had me guessing. I was thinking.”

Karen interrupted “I know what you were thinking” and she led him up the staircase to the fifth floor, stopping at room 502 and opening the door.

“Weren’t we just in room 402?”

Karen pushed Justin in and closed the door. “Maybe. I didn’t notice” and she started to undress.

“And wouldn’t the firm frown on such a thing?”

“Oh, yes” Karen said, “one of us would be fired. But don’t worry. They don’t know we’re in this room.” Apparently the danger made Karen even more excited and she didn’t hold back any physical or verbal feelings. Justin had the best (and for him at least) the quietest sex ever.

Juan was setting up to move on to the next location, the town hall and courthouse, when he noticed his boss talking to a man in a suit. The man handed him a paper and explained something that his boss was upset about. His boss walked back toward the crew with a dejected expression, tightly gripping the paper.

That morning, Justin got in his car and drove to the firm. His life was better than it was yesterday. No more stress about the bar or getting a job. He passed the Presbyterian Church without noticing. He wasn't sure how he and Karen would turn out but the thought of continuing their relationship in secret created a new challenge. "How do you hide an inappropriate relationship from lawyers who are experts at reading people?"

Karen greeted him when he walked in. "Well, how did your first assignment go?" She said in her most professional tone. Justin patted his attaché case.

"Good, easier than I thought. I gave those workers the injunction and notice of legal action. What idiot wanted to put cobblestones out there anyway?"